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China Discovers Public Diplomacy

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Summary

China's foreign policy has acquired more visibility and capacity for initiative in recent years, adapting both to the needs of its economic boom and the changing circumstances of international society.

Introduction

China's foreign policy has acquired more visibility and capacity for initiative in recent years, adapting both to the needs of its economic boom and the changing circumstances of international society. Besides playing a greater role in world affairs through the more discrete channels of inter-governmental diplomacy, China has undertaken a series of activities with an eye to world public opinion, renewing or strengthening existing tools and creating others that are new. Among the former, official visits have multiplied –with China either making or receiving them– and the country has intensified and modernised its use of the news media. Highlights among the new thrusts include hosting major international events (the Shanghai Universal Exposition and the Olympic Games) and the implementation of an assertive policy of spreading China's language and culture on the international stage.

China Takes the Initiative

As with other aspects of China's modernisation, one can discern in its new diplomacy elements borrowed from other countries and these, combined with the circumstances of China itself, make for an original model. One unique characteristic of the Chinese model of public diplomacy rests in the fact that it has developed from a tradition of political propaganda typical of a single-party regime, as observed by Ingrid d'Hooghe. Unlike the Western systems from which it takes inspiration, the Chinese model stems from strong centralised power and works through channels tightly controlled by the authorities, leaving a very thin margin for initiative by other parties. This feature goes a long way towards explaining the Chinese system's efficiency, but at the same time raises questions about its weaknesses.

Behind the new Chinese diplomacy we find in the first place a new need to manage the country's growing interdependence with the outside world. China has undergone a profound transformation in the past 30 years as a result of successive waves of reforms guided by a pragmatic combination of political continuity and free-market measures. Thanks to its demographic weight and the stunning growth of its economy, which would not have been possible without a progressive opening to the outside world, China is destined to play a leading role on the international stage. China is now the world's fourth-largest economy and its third biggest buyer of oil. It holds more foreign currency than any other country, with much of it invested in the US, and is one of the planet's top recipients of direct foreign investment.

Chinese society is less and less an impenetrable world anchored in its millenary past or tied up in a revolutionary project. Contacts with the outside world are increasing in every realm of human activity. In 2005 Beijing airport rose from 20th to 14th place in the world ranking of passenger traffic. That same year China received 46 million visits (making it fourth in the world in that category), not counting trips to Macao and Hong Kong, and was seventh in the world in the amount its people spent overseas as tourists. China has surpassed the US in the number of cable TV

subscribers and telephone handsets. Only in the US are there more Internet users than in China, although Web penetration is still far from reaching levels seen in industrialised countries. The literacy rate among adults, although not evenly distributed, is around 90%. School attendance is close to 99% and the number of students enrolled in upper level education exceeded 17 million in 2006. More children are learning English in China than in the US. At least 117,000 Chinese young people studied abroad in 2003; more than 700,000 did so from 1978-2003, according to the Chinese Education Ministry, most of them studying in Europe and the US. And the number of foreign students in China rose from 30,000 in 1995 to more than 100,000 in 2004, most of them from other Asian countries.

By joining the process of economic globalisation, China has become more dependent on the outside world, and has more and more influence on the global economy. It needs to assure itself supplies of energy and raw materials, consolidate and diversify markets for its manufactured goods and acquire more knowledge and technology to give greater added-value to its products. As a result, its foreign policy is more open to taking part in world affairs through China's joining international organisations, participating in peacekeeping missions and increasing development aid. And with greater and greater efficiency, it is making these policies known to world public opinion. China's current generation of leaders, unlike the preceding one, makes many official visits abroad. Trips by President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao and other ministers and senior officials to Europe, Africa and Latin America, their visits to China's main partners (Australia, India, the US, Russia and Japan) and their presence in various forums of the industrialised world combine all these goals with the expression of public messages of friendship and cooperation.

The Path of Peaceful Development

Secondly, China's new public diplomacy is guided by the need to project a friendly and attractive image on the world stage, one that dispels possible fears of a threatening hegemony. In the broad international debate on the rise of China, the 'threat theory' predicts that the expansive rise of the recently awakened Asian giant will inevitably lead to confrontation with its neighbours and even conflicts on a larger scale, as was the case with other emerging powers that lacked sufficient *lebensraum* in the past. In response to this position, there has emerged in China the theory of the peaceful 'rise' or 'development', the main goal of which is to lift most of China's population out of poverty by taking part in economic globalisation and maintaining relations of cooperation and friendship with the rest of the world. China argues that its development depends on a peaceful environment and is linked to the development of the rest of the world in a win-win arrangement. China insists it does not seek domination or hegemony, but rather the 'building of a harmonious world'.

So far the thesis of the 'peaceful rise' has for the most part been in sync with the form and content of Chinese foreign policy. China has defused potential regional conflicts and backed multilateralism on the world stage, allowing its international image to benefit from the damage the US has suffered because of its policy in the Middle East. It has assured itself the supplies it needs through diplomatic channels and averted pressure and confrontation in the battle for international markets. But in China's peaceful path towards becoming a major power, many inside and outside the country seem to think China needs greater tools for gaining prestige and influence –in other words, more power of seduction–. Joseph Nye has stated that China, like India, has adopted 'a foreign policy that made it more attractive in the eyes of others. But so far neither of these two countries has achieved a prominent position in the indices of soft power resources held by the United States, Europe and Japan. Although culture provides a degree of soft power, internal policies and values limit it, especially in China, where the Communist Party fears granting intellectual freedom and resists outside influences' ('La cultura asiática seduce', *Clarín*, 23/XI/2005).

According to some tools for measuring countries' global images, such as the Anholt Nation Brand Index, China's international reputation has recently improved. Still, a recent report by the Foreign Policy Center described China's image problem as an 'emergency', and called this China's main strategic threat. The study pointed out what it called a strong contrast between the Chinese people's image of themselves and how they are seen from abroad. The report said there is also a large and 'dangerous' gap between this image from abroad and the reality of the recent achievements and the transformation of Chinese society. Certainly there are concerns over the rise of China that might be eased with better knowledge of its progress, values and culture. But to reduce contradictions between the Chinese development model and its relations with the rest of the world to a mere question of image would be an incomplete analysis.

China's rise causes contradictory perceptions and real worries abroad. Along with the positive expectations that it triggers as a huge market and land of new opportunities, its growth model also raises fears of plant relocations and job losses in the rest of the world. The purchasing power of the Chinese economy fuels growth in other regions, but at the same time its hunger for raw materials raises worries about price increases and possible shortages. There are jitters over the environmental repercussions of unbridled growth and the possible social and political consequences of wealth spread unevenly. Talk of 'harmonious socialism' clashes with travellers' accounts of frenzied buying by consumers, unchecked real estate development and fabulous fortunes. China's policy of internationalising its companies, which has culminated in attempts to buy major foreign firms, has at times run into a wall of opposition from western financial authorities. China's efforts to invest in R+D and its progress in education and science are well known, but a record of violating copyright and industrial patents continues to drag down the image of Chinese manufacturers.

Nor is China's foreign policy free of contradictions. China's traditional position as a leader of the developing world stands in sharp contrast to its fervent defence of economic globalisation. Its calls for peaceful coexistence do not sit well with the hefty investments China has made in modernising its armed forces. China's protection of the government of Sudan jeopardises its image as it prepares to host the Olympic Games ('Darfour collides with Olympics, and China yields', *NYT*, 13/I/2007). On the domestic front, China's economic success has not brought about significant political reforms. The single-party regime remains in force, even as the public sector's role in the economy wanes. After the events of Tiananmen Square and the ebb of the timid process of change unleashed by the reforms of the 1980s, only very slowly are mechanisms of social control being eased, even as the new leadership shows a greater sensitivity to social imbalances stemming from strong economic growth. International scrutiny continues to turn up grave deficiencies in China's human rights record, and demonstrations by world famous figures on Tibet continue to challenge China's treatment of its regional minorities (Richard Gere, 'Railroad to perdition', *NYT*, 15/VII/2006).

From Flyers to the Internet

China maintains a monopoly over its news media and makes a great effort to control information flowing from the country to the rest of the world. It also works hard to keep most of its population oblivious to certain kinds of news content from abroad. The statistics that China makes available are incomplete and not readily accessible. There are hardly any institutions that publish reports or analyses with international scope that are critical or of an alternative nature. Except in controlled settings like tourist complexes, it is impossible to see foreign television channels freely or read the foreign press. China is said to employ tens of thousands of 'cyberpolice' who monitor the Internet with the goal of blocking engine-searches for certain expressions or access to specific web sites.

Still, there is no doubt that despite government censorship, the extraordinary development of TICs in China is creating conditions for unprecedented development of free information and debate. A visit to government web sites in China, which are available in several languages, gives an impression of modernity and independence, and even of changing customs and freedom of opinion.

China has been abandoning old forms of propaganda and psychological warfare. Long gone are the days of flyers being rained down on Taiwan, or the export of revolution to other continents. The main organs of the Chinese government, including embassies, have Internet pages in English and other languages (www.china.org.cn boasts no fewer than 10, including Esperanto). Government-controlled media do not shy from touchy subjects and explain progress in sensitive subject areas, although they always refer to government White Papers.

The *Xinhua* news agency and the *People's Daily*, the organ of the Chinese Communist Party, offer information in seven languages, including a simplified version of Chinese. The *China Daily*, which is billed as the 'only national newspaper in English', was created in 1981 and has a daily circulation of 200,000, a third of the total being distributed in more than 150 countries. It oversees other publications and supplements in English such as the local papers *China Daily Hong Kong Edition*, *Shanghai Star* and *Beijing Weekend*. In Hong Kong, the press seems to be under less rigid controls. The main television network, CCTV, has had a 24-hour channel in English since 2002, with 45 million subscribers around the world. Radio China International, established in 1941, transmits 211 hours of programming per day in 38 foreign languages, four dialects of Chinese and in *putonghua* (Mandarin, the official language of China).

The communications sector is still monopolised by the State, and with the partial exception of Hong Kong and other enclaves with more international exposure, radio and television stations are still subjected to strict restrictions on content, as are the foreign companies that since 2005 have been authorised to broadcast via cable in some areas. Self-censorship is a toll that even the Rolling Stones had to pay, dropping some songs from their repertoire in the first concert they gave in China, in Shanghai in 2006. Meanwhile, penetration of foreign entertainment programmes is more and more intense thanks to agreements with local corporations such as the Shanghai Media Group and Hunan TV (*NYT*, 28/XI/2005, 16/I/2006), which are state owned but have a clearly commercial management style (the limits between state owned and private property are seeming more and more diffuse these days). Foreign programmes also reach Chinese receivers through an undetermined number of illegal satellite dishes. Although imports of foreign cultural products are severely limited (around 20 full-length films per year in the case of cinema), western cultural influences make their way in through other channels, such as distribution of music or films over the Internet or other means (an estimated 95% of the films sold in China are bootleg copies), often after having been 'orientalised' in Taiwan or South Korea. (*NYT*, 2/I/2006).

Reserves of Soft Power

Along with increasing official contacts and visits and changing the way it communicates with the outside world, China has begun to use other tools of public diplomacy. Chief among these are the staging of major international events (Summer Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008, the Universal Exposition in Shanghai in 2010) and an active policy of cultural and educational exchanges.

Although they are consistent with the strategy of a peaceful ascent and integrated into the overseas information policy, to a large extent these programmes use different channels to the ones discussed earlier. As is the case in other countries, cultural relations seek to build confidence and credibility over the long term through permanent contact with key social sectors in other nations, rather than achieve concrete, immediate goals through focused political messages. As Jan Melissen has observed, recent trends in overseas cultural policy have tried to have cultural relations maintain a certain distance from direct, official messages, even if the relations are promoted by government bodies. At the same time they have broadened their scope to include questions such as human rights, democratic values, the role of the news media, etc, without skirting issues of sensitive national debate. Although Chinese civil society is far from reaching levels of independence comparable to industrialised democracies, China's new public diplomacy seems to have taken careful note of how to strengthen the country's image abroad through cultural relations.

The influence of Chinese culture spread throughout Asia and elsewhere in the world long before the Beijing government decided to incorporate it as an asset in its relations with other countries: in fact, about 30 centuries before. China suffers from no lack of 'soft power' reserves to back up its cultural heritage: a centuries-old intellectual tradition which extended to neighbouring countries in the first millennium BC; inventions like paper, gunpowder, the printing press, porcelain or silk spread through Asia before reaching the West with medieval travellers. The distant image of Cathay and its riches inspired European maritime expansion. Ancient Chinese philosophy, traditional medicine, martial arts, calligraphy and painting were made known around the world by missionaries, traders and diplomatic envoys, especially starting with the period of the Unequal Treaties. Starting in the late 19th century, the Chinese Diaspora established crafts, gastronomy, gymnastics and the holidays of the Chinese calendar in many capitals of Europe and the Americas.

Chinese government bodies take it upon themselves regularly to recall these achievements of the past, and others that are less well known, through news such as that of the discovery of an old map suggesting China discovered the Americas ('China beat Columbus to it, perhaps', *The Economist*, 12/I/2006), or the appearance of fossils that challenge beliefs on the original dwelling place of *homo sapiens*, or the finding of the oldest known traces of paper. Recovering the past prior to China's stagnation in the 19th century also serves the function of boosting national pride ('China gives no ground in spats over history', *Washington Post*, 22/IX/2004) and staking a claim to being a first-grade international power ('La Chine s' imagine en grande puissance', *Le Monde*, 5/II/2007).

Indeed, China does not need to exert itself too much to stimulate interest in its culture beyond its borders. Some European countries have had to wait in line to hold 'Crossed Years' (Britain, France, Italy, Russia and Spain this year, Greece in 2008, coinciding with the Olympic Games) or to gain permits for opening cultural centres in Chinese territory. Museums in the West stage major exhibits of Chinese art, such as *Three Emperors* at the Royal Academy of Arts, which coincided with the visit President Hu Jintao paid to London in 2005. Auction houses are posting record sales of Chinese pieces (although with upward price pressure from Chinese buyers), both classical and contemporary ('Sotheby's bets on a windfall for today's Chinese art', *NYT*, 29/III/2007).

New Cultural Assets

Adding to its traditional cultural assets, China now features new, contemporary creations that are drawing more and more attention in the West. Since the late 1990s, western curators (and Chinese ones such as Hou Hanru) have been dedicating stands at art shows and exhibits to avant-garde Chinese art coming out of major urban areas. Even though such artistic expression is not free of censorship in China itself, the government 'has finally realised that contemporary art "sells" wonderfully' ('El cuento chino', *ABCD*, 8/IV/2006), and recently started sponsoring the creation of art centres ('China pierde el pudor a través del arte', *El Mundo*, 8/III/2007). Young Chinese artists are all the rage, promoted heavily by major galleries in Britain and the US. Christie's global sales of contemporary Chinese art rose from €13.5 million to €90 million from 2004 to 2006 ('El arte chino, por las nubes', *El País*, 27/III/2007). Museums like the Pompidou Centre or the Guggenheim are considering opening branches in China ('Los artistas chinos protagonizan el nuevo boom del mercado del arte', *La Nación*, 16/I/2007). In Spain, Casa Asia regularly holds cultural events centring on China, such as the recent one on 'hyperarchitecture and hyperdesign'. Artium and the Fundación ICO recently staged exhibits of contemporary Chinese photography and video. Modern Chinese dance has made its way to New York with troupes such as the Guandong Modern Dance Company, Beijing Modern Dance Company and Shen Wei Dance Arts ('China's pirouette into modern form', *IHT*, 18/III/2007).

Chinese literature has a hard time making a name for itself, although it is starting to carve inroads in literary supplements and on book shelves. In 2000, Gao Xingjian (exiled in France) won the first Nobel prize for literature by a Chinese-language writer. In 2004, Chinese as an original language

held 16th place on UNESCO's *Index Translationum* with 274 translations, improving from 21st place in the period 1979-2002, although it is still ranked below Dutch (330), Portuguese (383) and Catalan (392). Chinese stands have emerged at international book fairs, offering above all low-cost printing but also translation rights ('Less reading, more schmoozing at London Book Fair', *NYT*, 18/IV/2007). Government officials say that in 2004 China exported 1,314 publication rights and imported 10,040. In 2005 Penguin paid a record US\$100,000 for the overseas rights to *The Wolf Totem*, a work by Jiang Rong that sold more than one million copies in China. Peter Jackson, director of *Lord of the Rings*, has purchased the rights to a screenplay ('A novel, by someone, takes China by storm', *NYT*, 3/XI/2005). China is the world's leading printer, but its overseas book sales are far below those of Japan or South Korea, and those books which are exported deal mainly with traditional Chinese culture ('Can culture be China's next export?', *People's Daily Online*, 29/XII/2006).

Chinese cinema is growing in volume and awards, but is only slowly winning over fans at Western box offices. In 2006 a record number of 330 films were produced in China. This year Jia Zhangke won the Golden Lion award in Venice for his film *Still Life*, and Zhang Yuan took a prize in Berlin for *Little Red Flowers*. In 2004, Xu Jinglei earned the award for best director for the film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* at the San Sebastián film festival. *2046*, by Wong Kar Wai, received the Screen International Award, part of the European cinema prizes, in 2004. Zhang Yimou's film *Hero* was nominated in 2003 for an Oscar for best foreign film. His more recent *Curse of the Golden Flower* has become the biggest box-office hit in the history of Chinese cinema. In 2002 Chen Kaige won the 'Concha de Oro' for best director at San Sebastián for *Together*. China's biggest movie star, Gong Li, is a regular at the Cannes film festival. Meanwhile, China's market for films shown in theatres is on the rise and luring interest from industries in neighbouring countries like Japan and Singapore ('For Singapore filmmakers, China Beckons', *IHT*, 11/IV/2007). And the emergence of Chinese-language films has not gone unnoticed by all-powerful American producers ('China a hit in Hollywood, Bollywood a flop', *Asia Times*, 22/VII/2005), which are aware of the potential of Chinese actors or directors such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan or Ang Lee (born, respectively, in the US, Hong Kong and Taiwan).

Cultural Deficit and Government Action

Despite these successes on the international scene, state-owned Chinese media complain of a deficit in cultural exchanges. They stress the efforts that government officials are making to correct this imbalance by stimulating domestic production and calling for greater creativity and diversity in China's cultural products. Here is another incentive for implementing a formal policy of spreading Chinese culture: boosting that odd mix of merchandise and communicative power that is held by cultural products. The *Report on Government Work* that was presented at the 10th National People's Congress in March 2007 gave a brief accounting of the development of China's culture industry: 'We energetically developed culture and sports. The press and publishing, radio, television, film, literature and art, philosophy and the social sciences flourished. Culture-related facilities, especially in rural areas, were improved. The project to expand radio and television coverage in rural areas was extended from incorporated villages to unincorporated villages. Continued progress was made in the project to build multi-use cultural centers in communities, towns and townships and the national shared database project for cultural information and resources. Reform of the cultural management system was deepened. Development of the culture industry was accelerated, and cultural exchanges with other countries were increased (...). Efforts to promote socialist cultural and ethical progress were strengthened'.

Cultural co-operation is not an isolated issue for the government but rather consciously integrated into the strategy for peaceful development: 'As the trend of economic globalization develops in depth, China, all the more aware of the significance of exchanges and dialogues among different civilizations, is working harder to get the rest of the world to understand China, while absorbing

and drawing on the useful fruits of other civilizations. In recent years, China has cooperated with numerous countries in holding Culture Weeks, Culture Tours, Culture Festivals, thus helping promote exchanges and understanding between the Chinese people and other peoples, and creating new forms for equal dialogue between civilizations' (*White Paper on Peaceful Development Road*, www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Dec/152669.htm).

In a recent article, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao gave a more detailed explanation of cultural relations as part of China's global strategy and described a complete programme: 'We should expand cultural exchanges with other countries. Cultural exchanges are a bridge connecting the hearts and minds of people of all countries and an important way to project a country's image. (...) We should use various forms and means, including tour performance and exhibition, Chinese language teaching, academic exchange and sponsoring culture year activities, to promote Chinese culture and increase its appeal overseas. We should implement a "going global" cultural strategy, develop culture industry, improve the international competitiveness of Chinese cultural enterprises and products, increase the export of books, films, TV programs and other cultural products, so that these Chinese cultural products and particularly the best of them, will reach the rest of the world (...)'. Wen concludes by adopting the concept of public diplomacy: 'We should conduct public diplomacy in a more effective way. We should inform the outside world of the achievements we have made in reform, opening-up and modernization in a comprehensive, accurate and timely manner. At the same time, we should be frank about the problems we have. (...) We should work to enable the international community to develop an objective and balanced view on China's development and international role, so as to foster an environment of friendly public opinion for China' ('Our Historical Tasks at the Primary Stage of Socialism and Several Issues Concerning China's Foreign Policy', *China Daily*, 27/II/2007).

Before the actual public formulation of this policy, China had already begun to invest considerable resources in a range of culture policies aimed overseas, on its own or in co-operation with other countries. In 2003 the Kennedy Center in Washington DC held the *Festival of China*, with a budget of US\$2 million. After touring the globe, the Xian warriors stopped off in Spain in 2004 and they will soon visit the British Museum in London, where they will coincide with the *China in London* festival, held annually since 2006. The year of China in France was held from October 2003 to June 2004, with hundreds of cultural activities. During a visit to Russia in late March of this year, President Hu Jintao inaugurated the year of China in Russia, which boasts 200 commercial, scientific and cultural activities. These and others mentioned in the earlier section are just some examples of this fledgling policy of China assuring a cultural presence overseas.

The Return of Confucius

Among the initiatives the Chinese government has undertaken to enhance the country's image abroad, special mention should go to the policy for international promotion of the language. Although government sources say there are precedents that go back to the 1950s, the current policy for teaching Chinese as a foreign language 'is an integral part of the current drive for reform and openness'. After a 'severe setback' during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), 'the national power of China has made notable progress, and teaching of Chinese as a foreign language has entered a new phase of vigorous development'. In 1987, China formed what would later become the Office of the Chinese Language Council International (abbreviated as Hanban, from *Hanyu Bangongshi*, or China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language).

Hanban's mission is 'making the Chinese language and culture teaching resources and services available to the world, meeting the demands of overseas Chinese learners to the utmost, to contributing to the formation of a world of cultural diversity and harmony'. Its functions include supporting the teaching of Chinese in other countries' educational systems, supervising the Confucius Institute and establishing institutes abroad; training specialised teachers and sending

volunteer teachers abroad; coming up with study plans and materials; and developing and promoting tests of students' knowledge of Chinese.

China's Education Ministry explains the policy this way: 'Teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) is an integral part of China's reform and opening up drive. To promote TCFL is of strategic significance to popularize the Chinese language and culture throughout the world, to enhance the friendship and mutual understanding as well as the economic and cultural cooperation and exchanges between China and other countries around the world, and to elevate China's influence in the international community'. It can be argued that the Chinese authorities have decided to promote their language for at least two reasons: to show the country has all the attributes of a major power, including an important international language, and to help foreigners get to know better China's culture and values and thus be more inclined to accept China's positions and vision of the world. In line with the theory of peaceful rise, one can also discern in official Chinese discourse a desire to present the international expansion of Chinese culture and language not as hegemonic or a bid to impose, but rather as just another component of the world's cultural diversity, a richness in which different cultures must coexist in harmonious equilibrium despite their differences.

The flagship of Chinese public diplomacy takes its name from the great sage whose moral and humanistic teachings spread through China and neighbouring countries starting in the 6th century BC. There would be nothing odd about China choosing the name of its most internationally famous man of letters, just like other institutes carry the names of Goethe, Dante Alighieri or Cervantes, but for the fact that China tried several times during the 20th century to wipe away all trace of Confucianism, especially during the Cultural Revolution. Now, however, the image of Confucius and the basic lines of his thought fit into the image that China wants to project to the rest of the world: harmony with other countries, virtuous government, mutual respect, loyalty, humanity and restraint. The recovery of the figure of Confucius also evokes the soft influence that China exerted over Asia in ancient times and its growing presence now in the region. Within China, the values of Confucianism are celebrated on state-run TV and once again appear on school curricula and even in official speeches, all as an ethic reference aimed at a society undergoing an abrupt transformation, one that finds itself halfway between the collectivism of the communist regime and China's version of capitalism. It might be a home-grown alternative to the western cultural values associated with economic development and modernisation ('The Confucian renaissance', *Asia Times*, 16/XI/2005; 'Can the Sage save China?', *Newsweek*, 20/III/2006; 'Confucius re-enters China's schools to parry Westerners ways', *Christian Science Monitor*, 8/XII/2006).

One Hundred Institutes in Three Years

The success of the Confucius Institutes has been stunning. The first two opened almost simultaneously in Seoul and Maryland in November 2004. As this study went to print, the Institute's web site said there were altogether 110 branches. Some recent press reports put the figure at more than 140 such centres as of March 2007 ('The new tongue-in-chic', *China Daily*, 14/III/2007). Furthermore, some 100 foreign institutions have requested or shown interest in opening a new institute. It seems Hanban has broadened its initial goals by seeking to reach the figure of 500 institutes in 2010 and 1,000 in 2020. In order to teach Chinese to 100 million students in 2020 it is estimated that 5 million teachers will have to be trained. But according to the same figures, today there are only 5,000 teachers in China who are certified to teach Chinese to foreigners. In 2004 the Chinese government launched a programme to send 'volunteers' abroad to teach Chinese and train new professors. Just over 1,000 professors and an equal number of volunteers served abroad in 2006 ('China moves to meet surging demand for Chinese language teachers', *People's Daily*, 20/III/2007).

The spread of the Confucius Institute, now present on five continents, highlights the global ambitions of Chinese public diplomacy (see Table 1). Their distribution is also significant. They are

predominant in Asia and Europe, while the United States is the country with the highest number. Their presence in Africa is fledgling, but indicative of China's growing interest in the continent. There are many fewer in Latin America, but no shortage of talk of centres opening soon. In Spain there are three Confucius Centres so far: at the Autonomous University of Madrid, the University of Granada and the University of Valencia.

Table 1. Distribution of Confucius Institutes

Country	Nr of institutes
Canada	4
US	18
Mexico	4
AMÉRICA	26
Australia	3
Bangladesh	1
China	1
South Korea	7
Philippines	1
Georgia	1
India	1
Japan	6
Kazakhstan	2
Mongolia	1
New Zealand	1
Pakistan	1
Singapore	1
Sri Lanka	1
Thailand	13
Uzbekistan	1
ASIA-OCEANÍA	42
Egypt	1
Kenya	1
Lebanon	1
Madagascar	1
Rwanda	1
South Africa	1
Turkey	1
Zimbabwe	1
AFRICA-MIDDLE EAST	8
Austria	1
Germany	8
Belgium	3
Belarus	1
Czech Republic	1
Spain	3
Finland	1
France	4
Bulgaria	1
Hungary	1
Ireland	1
Italy	1
Netherlands	1
Poland	1
Portugal	1
UK	8
Romania	1
Russia	3
Sweden	1
Ukraine	1
Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	1
EUROPE	44
TOTAL	110

Source: www.hanban.edu.cn, May 2007.

The organisational model of the Confucius Institute is more flexible than that of its western counterparts. This flexibility is attributable to a drive for rapid impact with meagre resources: 50 employees at the central headquarters in Beijing (it opened a new building in April 2007, according to *Xinhua*) and diplomatic and educational staff at Chinese embassies and consulates, besides the professors and volunteers sent abroad. There are no precise and complete figures for Hanban's budget. As a result of this frugality, the network has been able to grow swiftly only in an 'organic' way ('Selling the sage of Qufu', *The Economist*, 8/VII/2006).

Rather than a physical and visible presence with buildings designated as such, the Institute prefers to set up shop in universities or institutes of higher education. Openings of new institutes are often part of an agreement or exchange of letters during a meeting or official visit between Chinese leaders and those of other countries, and as such they appear in press communiqués along with other official announcements. Other times such openings are the result of a request by a foreign entity received in the central headquarters. In all cases, the institutes are founded through agreements with universities or other institutions, under which the latter contribute the infrastructure (premises, computers, academic planning) and the Chinese authorities agree to contribute financial aid, teachers and other forms of backing (cultural activities, teaching material).

Presumably the nature and volume of this aid depends on the means and resources that the host institution can earmark for the institute. For instance, the Confucius Institute of Kansas received US\$100,000 a year from the Chinese government and US\$150,000 from the university the year it opened ('Confucius Institute defends funding, mission', *Associated Press*, 8/I/2007). Harvard turned down financing from the Chinese government so as to keep its academic independence from being called into question. The University of Vancouver vetoed the formation of a board of trustees independent from the governing body of the university ('Teaching the ABCs of Chinese', www.canada.com, 16/XII/2005). Nor has controversy been absent from the opening of institutes in the US, as seen in these and other cases ('Why China wants you to learn Chinese', *Christian Science Monitor*, 4/I/2007).

In July 2005 the first International Congress of the Chinese Language was held, bringing together officials from the 25 institutes open at the time, in addition to other experts and educational professionals. China also pays attention to scholars of Chinese history and civilisation: in March 2007 the World Conference on Sinology was held in Beijing.

Besides running the international network of institutes, Hanban is in charge of administering official Chinese language exams. Government officials say more than half a million people have passed the *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* or HSK (Chinese proficiency test) since it was created in 1990. Many of them are or were foreigners studying in China: while in the mid-1980s some 8,000 foreigners studied in China each year, in 2005 the time had risen to 140,000. That year 117,660 foreigners took the test, up from 26.5% from the previous year.

The Rise of the Chinese Language

China's institutional effort to promote its language receives help from the growing demand to learn Chinese as a foreign language, a reflection of China's upward political and economic path. Official Chinese studies say there are between 30 and 40 million people studying Chinese around the world, and around 2,500 universities and institutes of higher learning offering Chinese classes in more than 100 countries. The fever to learn Chinese mostly affects neighbouring countries, the origin of most of the university students who go to China. In South Korea the number of students of the Chinese language rose 66% from 2000 to 2005, reaching 160,000. In Japan the number of schools offering Chinese trebled from 1993 to 2005, and it is now the second most frequently taught foreign language after English. Thailand has set for itself the goal of having 30% of students register to study Chinese over the next five years. China supports this trend by providing technical teaching

assistance and through development aid, for example giving assistance for students to attend Chinese schools in Cambodia.

The rise in demand is also felt outside the Asia-Pacific region, especially in the US. If the data provided by Berlitz are anything to go by, in 1984-2004 the demand for Chinese language teaching grew by 454.01%, faster than for English (43.29%) and Spanish (9.57%), while there was a decline in the demand for Italian (-17.23%), French (-17.29%) and German (-42.89%) (*I Informe Berlitz sobre la demanda de enseñanza de español en el mundo*, 2005). However, at the university level Chinese still lags far behind languages such as Spanish, French and German, with 34,153 students signing up to study it in 2002 (2.1% of the total, compared with 53.4%, 14.5% and 6.5% for these others, respectively). But Chinese grew more than those languages in the preferences of university students in the period 1998-2002, according to the Modern Language Association. With data not yet available for the period immediately after this, presumably in the past five years growth has been even greater (64% from 2000-05 according to some sources). At the primary and secondary education level, Chinese language teaching is still quite scarce, although it is rising. A report by the Asia Society ('Expanding Chinese-Language Capacity in the United States', 2005) estimates there are around 24,000 children learning Chinese in primary and secondary education, and another 150,000 in 'Heritage Schools'. At least 27 states offer the Chinese language in their state school systems. According to the Center for Applied Linguistics of Washington DC there are 12 private or state schools that offer immersion programmes in Mandarin (and one in Cantonese). News on openings of Chinese courses in schools and universities are growing in local newspapers. In 2003, Chinese was offered at 200 primary and secondary schools but in 2006 the number was 600. The College Board signed a five-year accord in April 2006 with Hanban to expand teaching of Chinese language and culture in American universities. As a destination for study abroad China posted the third-highest growth among US university students in the period 2003/04-2004/05, according to the Institute of International Education, after India and Argentina, although it only reached 8th place, with 3.1% of the total of overseas study spots.

The teaching of Chinese and other non-European languages has won the support of federal authorities in the US. The Senate is considering a bi-partisan bill to earmark US\$1.3 billion for the teaching of Chinese in state schools. The Chicago state school system has developed the largest Chinese programme over the past six years: almost 3,000 pupils are studying Mandarin in 20 schools. In 2005 the Defense Department provided a grant of US\$700,000 to the University of Oregon and the Portland area to help students of Mandarin throughout their educational years. The State Department will require greater linguistic skills from its diplomats, especially in Chinese, Urdu and Arabic ('Diplomats will be shifted to hot spots', *Washington Post*, 19/1/2006). The National Security Language Initiative, launched by President Bush in February 2006 seeks to encourage the teaching of foreign languages in the US and includes a federal assistance programme with US\$114 million in funding.

Table 2. The 10 most widely-spoken languages in the US

	Nr of speakers
English only	215,423,557
All other languages combined	46,951,595
Spanish	28,101,052
Chinese	2,022,838
French	1,643,838
German	1,382,613
Tagalog	1,224,241
Vietnamese	1,008,370
Italian	1,008,370
Korean	894,063
Russian	706,242
Total	262,375,152

Source: 'Language Use and English-speaking Ability, 2000', *Census 2000 Brief*, October 2003.

Another important factor in the rise of Chinese, especially in Asia and North America, is the volume and distribution of the Chinese diaspora. An estimated 45 million Chinese-born people are living abroad. Chinese communities spread around the World make up a network for basic maintenance of the language by providing a basic educational structure. In the US, where the Census Bureau says there are 2.02 million speakers of Chinese (see Table 2), early demand for Chinese as a foreign language has been met first by 'Heritage Chinese' schools, which Chinese communities had originally organised spontaneously. They were first attended by parents who do not speak Chinese, a growing number of whom want their children to be exposed to the language. Over the past decade China has rebuilt its ties with organisations of ethnic Chinese in South-East Asia, among whom there is a better disposition towards the great power from which many fled for political or economic reasons (Eric Teo Chu Cheow, 'China's Rising Soft Power in Southeast Asia', PacNet nr 19A, Pacific Forum CSIS, 3/V/2994). Some countries, such as Indonesia, have lifted Cold War-era restrictions on the teaching of Chinese.

Conclusions

Will the new Chinese diplomacy succeed in its goal of fostering a more favourable international perception of this rising power? There is no doubt that the charm offensive China has launched in recent years has had an extraordinary impact in the rest of the world, with help from the growing political and economic weight of China and probably the decline of the US's image. China's capacity to lure has solid foundations (thousand-year-old values, cultural tradition and creative vigour) and there is no doubt that the great strides of the past quarter-century, which would have been impossible without an unprecedented opening up to the outside world, are creating conditions for even deeper transformations in Chinese society. But the inadequacies which still limit the full development of China, the imbalances caused by stunning growth and the contradictions in its foreign policy limit the credibility of the great power's public relations policy and call into question its efficiency. Minxin Pei warns: 'before we all start learning Chinese and marvelling at the accomplishments of the Chinese Communist Party, we might want to pause for a moment' ('The Dark Side of China's Rise', *Foreign Policy*, April-May 2006).

All signs are that China still has a long way to go before it reaches the levels of prestige and intangible influence ('soft power') enjoyed by Europe or North America. In the end these are based on their high standard of living and a system of values that grants a high degree of individual freedom. Meanwhile, China takes careful note of the new international trends in public diplomacy for the management of its image abroad. However, it also monitors the criticism that the contradictions in its model of economic and political development receives overseas. Some incidents have put the Chinese authorities on the alert, such as an attack on an oil installation in Ethiopia that left nine Chinese workers dead, or Taiwan's refusal to allow the path of the running of the Olympic torch to include the island. Certainly, the proximity of the Olympic Games in Beijing have had an influence on certain recent changes in the government, including the replacement of Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing by Li Yang Jiechi (ambassador to Washington from 2001 to 2005) and the incorporation of the first non-communist minister in many years, Wan Gang, to lead the Ministry of Science and Technology.

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